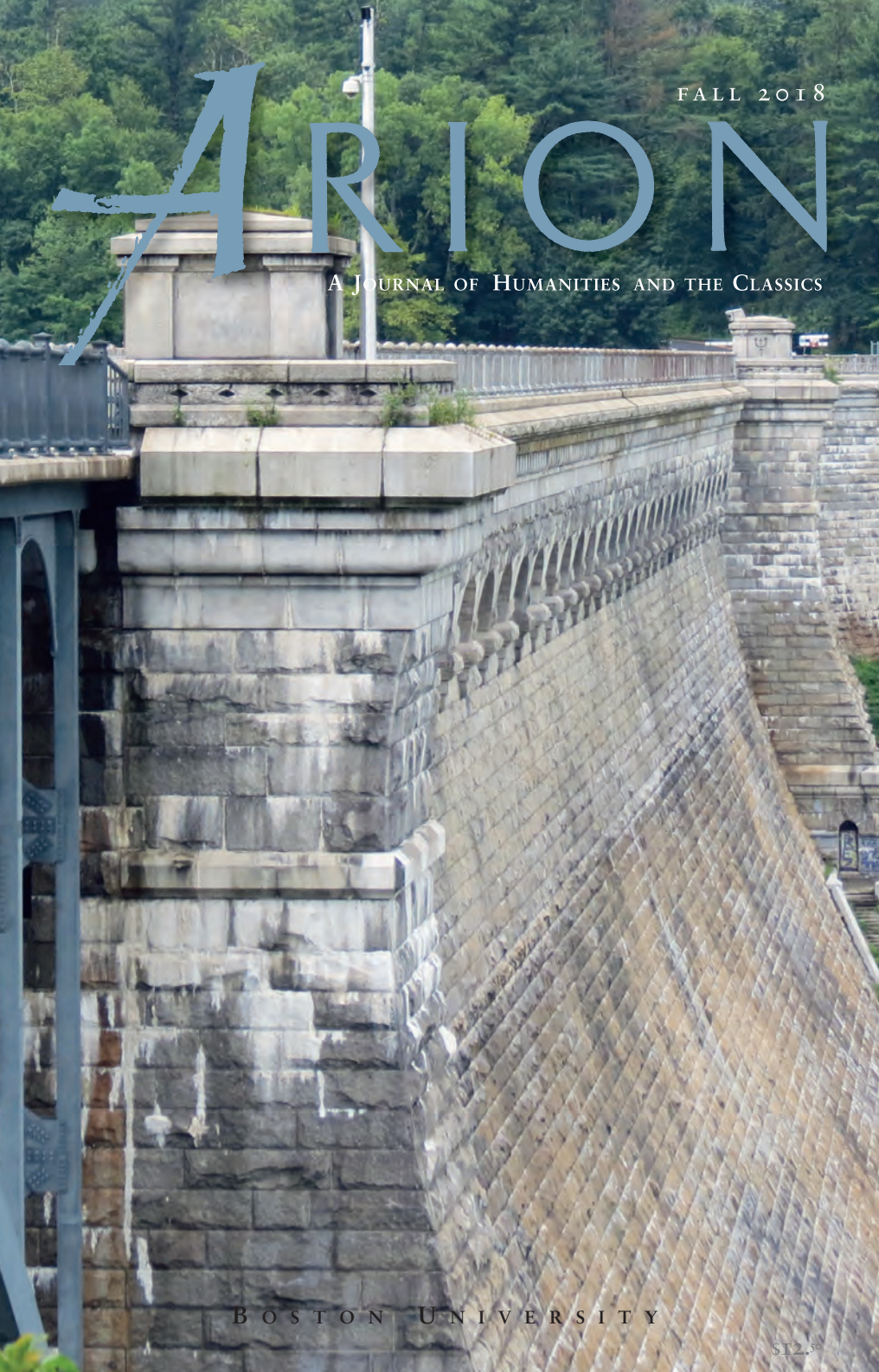

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The Consolations of Literature

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> BOSWELL: I said, Dr. Dodd seemed to be willing to die, and full of hopes of happiness.
> JOHNSON: "Sir, Dr. Dodd would have given both his hands and both his legs to have lived. The better a man is, the more afraid he is of death, having a clearer view of infinite purity."
>
> James Boswell, *Life of Samuel Johnson, LL.D.* (1799)

I.

Here is how I knew my mother was dying at last.

My office door shut, the light off. November sun slants in through the tall, narrow window and casts on the adjacent wall a sharp-edged parallelogram strangely brilliant. Enough illumination to read.

The tiny clock, positioned right above a student's head when a student occupies the chair facing my desk, reads 11:48. Class is at 1:30 and I have yet to prepare the readings I assigned from our anthology of drawn-and-quartered masterpieces of British Literature. Today two texts by Samuel Johnson (1709–1784), grand master of English prose. Judicious and opinionated literary critic, majestic essayist, stoic poet, first great lexicographer of the English language ("*Lexicographer: A writer of dictionaries; a harmless drudge that busies himself in tracing the original, and detailing the signification of words*," Johnson's *Dictionary of the English Language*, 1755). *Rambler* No. 60, an essay on biography (1750), and excerpts from the "Life of Pope," a biographical essay included in Johnson's *Lives of the Poets* (1781). Plus bits and pieces of James Boswell's *Life of Johnson* (1791), an

early celebrity biography and still the greatest biography in English. Our topic, a quintessential eighteenth-century question: "How to write a 'life'?"

Cutting it close, today, but I can pull off the most precarious of cliffhanger preparations. For I am a speed-reader, a talent honed in grade school by projectors that cast up on the screen lines of phantasmagoric text erased at faster and faster speeds. A talent perfected a few years later at the public library by scanning page after page of novels from the adult section for my keywords, "breast," "thighs," "wet," "hard"—these novels I dared not check out on my mother's card.

If a student knocks, I won't answer. If my cellphone rings, I will take only two calls. From my daughter's school, of course. And from Denver, where two thousand miles away my mother might be dying. My mother has been almost dying for decades. Several heart attacks, a bout with throat cancer, all befall her, but do not fell her. This autumn the pace of Mother's dying seems to have picked up, more sudden trips to the emergency room, more overnights at the rehabilitation center. Still, for thirty years it's been the same old story. So my mother's dying, out of habit, continues to feel infinite.

Calls from or about my mother come at home and range among other domestic worries: the child (did you really do your homework?), the cat (chronically constipated, am I going to pay the vet $200 dollars for another enema or do it myself?), the house (down in the basement the brick columns supporting the core of the house crumble), the writing (lately, the not-writing).

One of Johnson's most quoted aphorisms: "*Depend upon it, Sir, when a man knows he is to be hanged in a fortnight, it concentrates his mind wonderfully.*" Standing up, in one hour and thirty-five minutes, before twenty students to discuss Johnson can feel like a form of public hanging. So I concentrate my mind. First, lower expectations. I'm a pinch hitter for the eighteenth-century survey; the expert is on sabbatical. The class session is only seventy minutes. The stu-

dents only undergraduates. No background reading—just the assigned texts, closely read.

Turn to the *Rambler* essay. Johnson is fascinated by the incidents "*of a volatile and evanescent kind, such as soon escape the memory and are rarely transmitted by tradition*"; the "*invisible circumstances . . . more important than public occurrences*" that make 'a life' come alive. Johnson's examples: The Roman writer Sallust, "*that great master of nature,*" remarked that the would-be-king Catiline's "*walk was now quick, and again slow*" indicating "*a mind revolving something with violent commotion*" (after all, he had murdered his son to please a new wife!); the German philosopher Melancthon "*when he made an appointment, he expected not only the hour, but the minute to be fixed, that the day might not run out in the idleness of suspense.*"

Point out Johnson's insistence on the greater importance of "*domestic privacies*" over "*those performances and incidents, which produce vulgar greatness.*" In his *Life of Pope*, we can see—(yes, yes, of course I will have them pay close attention to Johnson's famous contrast of the great Alexander Pope's preeminent qualities: those of "*good sense*" and "*genius*." Pope has "*good sense*," but "*good sense alone is a sedate and quiescent quality, which manages its possessions well, but does not increase them; it collects few materials for its own operations and preserves safety, but never gains supremacy.*" I will underscore how the antithetical phrases characterize the middle-management mind of "*good sense*": "*manages . . . but does not increase*," "*collects . . . , but never gains*," and the "*sedate and quiescent quality*" of the sentence itself. Then mark the contrast to the next sentence's energy and daring—"*Pope had likewise genius; a mind active, ambitious, and adventurous, always investigating, always aspiring; in its widest searches still longing to go forward, in its highest flights still wishing to be higher; always imagining something greater than it knows, always endeavoring more than it can do.*" Note the alliteration of "*action*," "*ambition*," "*adventurous*," and "*aspiring.*" The escalation

of "*always*," "*still*," "*higher*," "*greater*," "*more*.")—that the real point is Johnson's obsession with the ephemeral detail, see how it makes Pope's *Life* alive: "*From his attention to poetry he was never diverted. If conversation offered anything that could be improved, he committed it to paper; if a thought, or perhaps an expression more happy than was common, rose to his mind, he was careful to write it; an independent distich was preserved for an opportunity of insertion, and some little fragments have been found containing lines, or parts of lines, to be wrought upon at some other time*."

This detail of little scraps of paper—bits of poems found in his desk, his bed, his coat pockets, after his death—a prime example of Johnsonian pathos. Just kills me.

EVERY AFTERNOON of my visit four months earlier I sat with my mother at her kitchen table. Mother's blondish-grey hair nicely cut, oval fingernails perfectly polished as always and as always she's manicured them herself. Mother's "face" on: the sheen of moisturizer, the coat of barely-there lipstick, the lightly penciled brown brows. Her face seemed thinner, but her face and her body had been thinning for so long that the increments of thinner became unremarkable, a Zeno's paradox of thinning. Her high cheekbones, lifting her face from pretty to beauty, were even more pronounced; even more than ever she could pass as much younger than her eighty-three years.

However, my mother had acquired a round belly, as if miraculously five months pregnant. The doctor, she reported, suggested possible conditions for the water swelling her abdomen, she did not go into detail. He gave her "pills," she complained in mild exasperation, "that don't work. I'm calling him back on Monday."

On the phone to doctors, she rattled off the eternally syllabic names of her countless pills and supplements. Polite,

but determined, she was active in the prosecution of her case, recording in a notebook—a tiny diary book for the year 1980—decades of symptoms, consultations with doctors, medications suggested, medications failed. To me she just said "pills."

Mother sat with her hands flat on the kitchen table. Her new belly pressed against the table's edge. She wore sunglasses in the house, lending her the aura of an aloof movie star. A recent cataract operation (she could "kick herself" for letting herself be talked into it, "didn't really need it") left her eyes scratchy and sensitive to light: "I can't even enjoy reading." Mother listened to recorded books, but not with pleasure. I understood. With an open book attention may wander, you doze, but you keep your finger on the page, the book dozes with you in your chair, in your bed. A finger on the back button not the same.

My mother, no historical novel or biography or news magazine in hand or at hand, struck me as a peculiar sight. I read more "literature" than my retired schoolteacher mother, and not simply for my profession as a professor of literature. Still my mother and I are both obsessive readers for whom a book serves as a life-support system—like those canisters of oxygen trundling behind and tethered to emphysema sufferers in the grocery aisles.

Here is an "*evanescent*" detail, a story my mother told about my birth. When she should have been laboring over me in the maternity ward, she can't stop reading, she is on the last chapter of a novel. The nurse tears the book from her hands, yells at her to get busy and push that baby (another page-turner) out.

My bookend to that anecdote, a story I never tell, underlines the difference between her mostly cheerful and my sometimes depressive temperaments. In a dream I am being escorted to a 'dying room' that, upon arrival, resembles a waiting room equipped with classroom desks. I do not resist my escort, I seem to know my time is up, but I have a last request—to stop at the library for a book to read. At the

library my boyfriend, at that time, perches on a table. The adoring young women clustered around him glare at me. I apologize, "Sorry, I just stopped by to get a book."

❖

AFTER OUR observation of Johnson's fixation with the "*volatile and evanescent detail,*" the class will next plumb his deep strain of melancholia. Despite his acute appreciation of the deeds and works of men (no women!) of genius and action, his fascination lies with the entropic drama of every human life. "*I have often thought that there has rarely passed a life of which a judicious and faithful narrative would not be useful. For, not only every man has in the mighty mass of the world great numbers in the same condition with himself, to whom his mistakes and miscarriages, escapes and expedients, would be of immediate and apparent use; but there is such an uniformity in the state of man, considered apart from adventitious and separable decorations and disguises, that there is scarce any possibility of good or ill, but is common to humankind. . . . We are all prompted by the same motives, all deceived by the same fallacies, all animated by hope, obstructed by danger, entangled by desire, and seduced by pleasure*."

The students will read these sentences out loud to take their full measure (and to take up time); they will read them almost tactilely as if they were reading Braille. We will note how the alliterative pairings—"*decorations and disguises*," "*escapes and expedients*," "*mistakes and miscarriages*," with the negative second term in each pair—shape the trajectory of all our lives from energy and hope to dispersion of energy and delusion in parallel structures: "*all prompted*," "*all animated*," "*obstructed*," "*entangled*," and "*seduced*."

Rather gloomy. I'll move to Johnson's deep sympathy with those at the uttermost end of this trajectory and his acting upon that sympathy, tell them about the various elderly dependents he housed with him, the beggars for whom he always carried

money in his pocket. His "*charity*," he responded when asked why he gave out coins, "*enabled them to survive and continue to beg.*"

Onto excerpts from Boswell's *Life of Johnson*, their reward. I hope they find *Johnson* attractive. Johnson attractive! When he visited his future wife's mother, to persuade her not to oppose the marriage of her daughter to a man twenty years younger and poor, Johnson "*was then lean and lank, so that his immense structure of bones was hideously striking to the eye, and the scars of the scrofula were deeply visible. He also wore his hair, which was straight and stiff, separated behind; and he often had, seemingly, convulsive starts and odd gesticulations, which tended to excite at once surprise and ridicule.*"

Yet Mrs. Porter "*was so much engaged by his conversation that she overlooked all these external disadvantages, and said to her daughter,* 'This is the most sensible man that I ever saw *in my life.*'" Johnson's sensibleness is not his main attraction for me—Johnson makes me laugh and I have a great weakness for men who make me laugh. Here is how I came to read Boswell's *Johnson*. Not in college, but the year after college, when I worked as an accounting clerk for the most minimum of minimum wages. My master plan to write short stories at night, quickly become famous. Unanticipated the compound dullness of sitting from 7:30 a.m. to 4:30 p.m. at a small desk in one of ten long rows of small desks in an enormous room to record the depreciation of the price of used fixtures—clothing racks, hangers, shelving—for a national chain of discount department stores.

I lived for my break at 9:30, to huddle with my coffee, coconut doughnut, and a book. The best book I read there, bit by bit between bites, all fourteen hundred and two pages, Boswell's biography. I read and I laughed out loud—the heads of my female co-clerks on one side of the cafeteria and those of the male supervisors on the other side turned to stare.

That copy of the *Life* somewhere in this office. Wide green paperback spine, I remember.

The long shelves of books towering above me in my narrow high-ceilinged office resemble, too much, lately, a book-lined coffin. I hope to strip them bare in some mathematical ratio to the ten years left until my retirement. Yet *the minute* you get rid of a book, you need *that very book* to be at hand.

Like my *Life of Johnson*, right here.

12:35. No time for this at all, but still I open the *Life* at a dog-eared page, dog-earing my life-long bad habit of marking a page of pleasure. Here are Johnson and Boswell, his much younger side-kick in this "buddy" biography: *"Talking of a modern historian and a modern moralist," Johnson said, "'There is more thought in the moralist than in the historian. There is but a shallow stream of thought in history.' BOSWELL: 'But surely, Sir, an historian has reflection.' JOHNSON. 'Why yes, Sir; and so has a cat when she catches a mouse for her kitten.'"*

Johnson's gibe still delights me. Reassuring to know at least one's sense of humor remains the same after so many years. Suddenly I wonder, though. Is finding remarks like this funny some kind of quirk, like a family's solipsistic sense of humor? Will my students think Johnson funny?

If I were teaching this passage and if my students didn't laugh, I could sweep my embarrassment under a pedagogical rug, by spelling out (what quicker way to kill a joke?) that the humor lies in a sudden drop from the high-toned comparison of moralists and historians to the level of cat, mouse, kitten. An example of "bathos," that favorite eighteenth-century juxtaposition of high style and low object in anti-climax. Remind them of Pope's bathetic turns last week in his mock-heroic *Rape of the Lock*:

> *Then flash'd the living Lightning from her Eyes,*
> *And Screams of Horror rend th'affrighted Skies.*
> *Not louder Shrieks to pitying Heav'n are cast,*
> *When Husbands or when Lap-dogs breathe their last . . .*
> (Canto III, 155–58)

Another dog-ear. (So difficult to stay away from the John-

sonian candy store, especially this great bin of delight, Boswell's *Life*.) "*Concerning the unfortunate poet, Christopher Smart, who was confined in a madhouse, he had, at another time, the following conversation with Dr. Burney: BURNEY. 'How does poor Smart do, Sir; is he likely to recover?' JOHNSON. 'It seems as if his mind had ceased to struggle with the disease; for he grows fat upon it.' BURNEY. 'Perhaps, Sir, that may be from want of exercise.' JOHNSON. 'No, Sir, he has partly as much exercise as he used to have, for he digs in the garden. Indeed, before his confinement, he used for exercise to walk to the ale house; but he was carried back again. I did not think he ought to be shut up. His infirmities were not noxious to society. He insisted on people praying with him; and I'd as lief pray with Kit Smart as anyone else. Another charge was he did not like clean linen; and I have no passion for it.*'"

I laugh, then defensively invent another pedagogical turn, refer to our discussion of Smart's sublime use of reverse "bathos," elevating his cat Jeoffrey as an epitome of divine creation:

For I will consider my Cat Jeoffry.
For he is the servant of the Living God duly and daily serving him.
For at the first glance of the glory of God in the East he worships in his way.
For is this done by wreathing his body seven times round with elegant quickness.
For then he leaps up to catch the musk, which is the blessing of God upon his prayer.

(From *Jubilate Agno*, 1759–63)

Speaking of cats. Nabokov extracted another peculiarly hilarious Johnsonian moment from the *Life* as the epigraph to his 1962 novel *Pale Fire*. The novel's fictional poet, John Shade, is Johnsonian in appearance and temperament, and composes a long poem in the eighteenth-century's verse of choice, the heroic stanza. It opens:

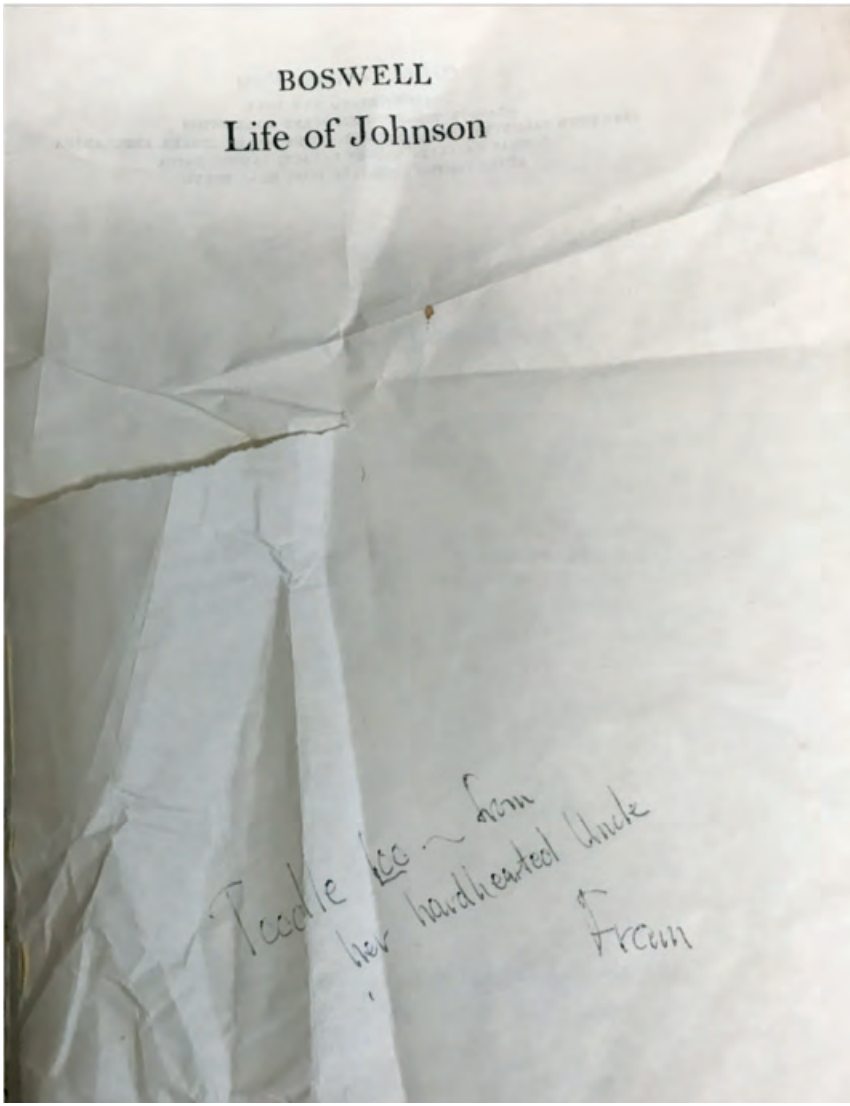
> I was the shadow of the waxwing slain
> By the false azure of the windowpane.

Here is my *Pale Fire*. The brittle glue of the spine cracks, the pages flake to papery dandruff as I turn to the epigraph: "*This reminds me of the ludicrous account he gave Mr. Langton, of the despicable state of a young gentleman of good family. 'Sir, when I heard of him last, he was running about town shooting cats.' And then in a sort of kindly reverie, he bethought himself of his own favorite cat, and said, 'But Hodge shan't be shot: no, no, Hodge shall not be shot.*'"

I put aside *Pale Fire* and pick up my *Life* again. The tattered green front cover falls off. Oh, yes, the inscription from my boyfriend, the boyfriend of the dying room dream. Big talker like Johnson, very funny with an odd liminal style of humor like Johnson. What possessed him to buy the *Life of Johnson* for me? His handwriting—letters stiffly upright, compressed as the books he could never write squeezed on a shelf—evokes him like an hallucination, tortoiseshell glasses, black hair curling up in antlers, warmed marble flesh. Also the inscription itself: "Toodle Loo—from her hardhearted Uncle, Fram." So many nonsense names he attached to me and to himself. Why "Fram"? I laugh, I can't explain why.

While I had that clerking job, I did not write one short story. I fucked and fucked "Fram" all night against my return first thing in the morning to the deadly inventories. Only Boswell's *Johnson* to look forward to.

(I could introduce Boswell's *Life* by telling the kids about my horrible clerking job—as English majors they will probably have some job like this right after college—and of finding refuge in coconut doughnuts and Johnson. Hold up my old *Life*. Show the title page with its inscription from "Fram." Allude to sex with Fram? Of course some students will always and only remember Johnson or the reading of the *Life of Johnson* as linked to desperate coupling. "*Volatile*!" "*Evanescent*!")


BOSWELL
Life of Johnson
Teedie Lee ~ from
her heartfelted Uncle
Frem

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THIS NOVEMBER, as Indian summer hangs on improbably, the phone at home reports that my mother's belly keeps swelling. At the hospital, she is "tapped," like a keg, the fluid drained out. I cringe at that image, involuntarily frame another image—a New Englandy pastoral image—tapped like a sugar maple for sap. Immediately repulsed by my own grotesque invention.

What the reports about my mother precisely mean remain obscure, no one draws an explicit conclusion. My father never waivers from their marriage-long compact of the strictest privacy, says only, "Your mother is doing the best she can." That's about as telling as it gets, and I wait politely and patiently until my mother makes her death business my business.

For now, my mother is simply disgusted, offended by her "condition." Not only her belly, now her legs and ankles swell with fluid. When will that doctor figure out what's wrong? In a rare admission of distress, through gritted teeth (odd you can hear that clinch over the phone), she says, "This isn't fun." Still she reports a bright spot, how much she enjoyed going out on a warmish day and sitting with my father in the sun, looking at the mountains. She adds lightly, incidentally, that she hasn't been out of the house for several weeks except for runs to the doctors' or the emergency room.

This means she's stopped tutoring kids at her church, she's stopped watering the rock garden I planted for her, stopped going out to her professional women's club luncheon meetings (which my sisters and I made fun of by calling them her "jello clubs").

❖

THE BRIGHT LIGHT shifts its knife-edge closer to the window. 12:55. Half an hour to go. Fueled by the panic of preparation, I skim the assigned selections from Boswell's *Life of Johnson* for those "*volatile and evanescent moments*" which

reveal our man. Here's a passage the anthology editors picked, surely, to induce guilt in students tempted to skip class: Johnson tells Boswell that his tutor at Oxford, a Mr. Jorden, "'*was a very worthy man, but a heavy man, and I did not profit much by his instructions. Indeed, I did not attend him much. The first day after I came to college I waited upon him, and then stayed away four. On the sixth, Mr. Jorden asked me why I had not attended. I answered I had been sliding in Christ Church meadow. And this I said with as much nonchalance as I am now talking to you. I had no notion that I was wrong or irreverent to my tutor.' BOSWELL: 'That, Sir, was great fortitude of mind.' JOHNSON: 'No, Sir; stark insensibility*.'" And this next passage should resonate with the solitary student despairing in the dorm room (I bet I dog-eared this page three decades ago, no time to check): A Doctor Adams tells Boswell that "*Johnson, while he was at Pembroke College, 'was caressed and loved by all about him, was a gay and frolicsome fellow, and passed there the happiest part of his life.' But this is a striking proof of the fallacy of appearances, and how little any of us know of the real internal state even of those whom we see most frequently; for the truth is, that he was then depressed by poverty, and irritated by disease. When I mentioned to him this account as given me by Dr. Adams, he said, 'Ah, Sir, I was mad and violent. It was bitterness which they mistook for frolic. I was miserably poor, and I thought to fight my way by my literature and my wit; so I disregarded all power and authority*.'"

Grand summation: Johnson's doubleness. In the prose, the parallel structures of antitheses. In his person, the physical uncouthness and glorious talk. In his persona, the brash manner and inner melancholy. And in his pronouncements, the initial attack of sharp wit at another's expense—then the sudden reverse to compassion or remorse.

A few notes, a few quotes. Enough to get through class today. I will call on four students to read out the observations on our texts they are required to bring to class. That gets

material on the table and inevitably the others start talking. This is a good group, likes to talk. I'll trust them and Johnson.

1:05. Done! Even time for coffee. That apple in my purse.

But once more I have fallen in love with Boswell's *Johnso*n, so just for my own pleasure, I read on a little bit more.

I had forgotten how death haunts the *Life of Johnson*. "*Death had always been to him an object of terror; so that, though by no means happy, he still clung to life with an eagerness at which many have wondered*." This terror is inspired by Johnson's fear of damnation, the uncertainty of salvation. In an interchange between himself, Boswell, and a Mrs. Knowles, Johnson cannot be persuaded from his terror:

Johnson (standing upon the hearth rolling about, with a serious, solemn, and somewhat gloomy air), "No rational man can die without uneasy apprehension." Mrs. Knowles: "The Scriptures tell us, 'The righteous shall have hope in his death.'" Johnson: "Yes, Madam; that is, he shall not have despair. But, consider, his hope of salvation must be founded on the terms on which it is promised that the mediation of our Saviour shall be applied to us, —namely, obedience; and where obedience has failed, then, as suppletory to it, repentance. But what man can say that his obedience has been such, as he would approve in another, or even in himself upon close examination, or that his repentance has not been such as to require being repented of? No man can be sure that his obedience and repentance will obtain salvation."

Boswell, upon discovering a rare weakness in the great man, cannot resist probing that terror with talk of how to face death even knowing that Johnson's "*thoughts upon this aweful change were in general full of dismal apprehensions*." In one torturous conversation, Boswell informs Johnson that the philosopher Hume has declared himself "*no more uneasy to think he should not be after this life, than that he had not been before he began to exist. JOHNSON. 'He may tell you, he holds his finger in the flame of a candle, without feeling pain; would you believe him?'*" Boswell, the twister, insists upon the topic: "*'Foote, Sir, told me, that when he was very*

ill he was not afraid to die.' JOHNSON. 'It is not true, Sir. Hold a pistol to Foote's breast, or to Hume's breast, and threaten to kill them, and you'll see how they behave.'" And yet again Boswell cruelly comes at Johnson asking "*whether we might not fortify our minds for the approach of death,*" and Johnson answers "*in a passion, 'No, Sir, let it alone. It matters not how a man dies, but how he lives. The act of dying is not of importance, it lasts so short a time.' He added (with an earnest look), 'A man knows it must be so and submits. It does him no good to whine.'*" Boswell still cannot stop himself however, and attempts to press Johnson further on the subject of death; Johnson, at last, erupts, "'*Give us no more of this.*'" He is so "*thrown into such a state of agitation that he expressed himself in a way that alarmed and distressed me; showed an impatience that I should leave him, and when I was going away, called to me sternly, 'Don't let us meet tomorrow.*'"

1:16. I can't stop reading. Johnson is failing. *December 1798*: "*[A]ll that could be done from professional skill and ability, was tried, to prolong a life so truly valuable.*"

Like Boswell I probe Johnson's terror, and I find the terror seems not only about the uncertainty of salvation, but about the very fact of dying, of not living any longer: "*He himself, indeed, having, on account of his very bad constitution, been perpetually applying himself to medical inquiries, united his own efforts with those of the gentlemen who attended him; and imagining that the dropsical collection of water which oppressed him might be drawn off by making incisions in his body, he, with his usual resolute defiance of pain, cut deep, when he thought that his surgeon had done it too tenderly.*"

Johnson was tapped, he tapped himself. My mother's "collection of water" has found me out in my refuge.

Now I cannot resist looking up "dropsy" although it's late late late. "Dropsy" is not in Johnson's *Dictionary of the English Language*. So to the Oxford English Dictionary, "dropsy," from the Middle English "hydropsy" is "*A morbid condition characterized by the accumulation of watery fluid in the serous cavities or the connective tissue of the body.*"

Dropsy is what we now call edema. Swelling often caused by congestive heart failure, the heart can't pump the body's fluids, they pool in the feet, the legs, the abdomen, the lungs. The victim drowns.

An internet search of dropsy offers up an eighteenth-century description of the "The Operation of Tapping," recommended for "dropsical" patients. Features exquisitely detailed black and white line engravings of the tapping instrument: the door-knob-shaped *trocar* is fixed onto the *canula*, a narrow tube ending in the *perforator*, whose sharp point has the same curves as the nib of an old-fashioned ink pen. There are even instructions: "*The Handle of the Trocar is generally made of Wood, the Canula of Silver, and the Perforator of Steel; great care should be taken by the Makers of this Instrument, that the Perforator should exactly fill up the Cavity of the Canula; for unless the Extremity of the Canula lies quite close and smooth on the Perforator, the Introduction of it into the Abdomen will be very painful: To make it slip in more easily, the Edge of the Extremity of the Canula should be thin and sharp; and I would recommend that the Canula be Steel, for the Silver one being too soft a Metal becomes jagged or bruised at its Extremity with very little use. After the Operation, the Canula must be wiped clean and dry, by drawing a Slip or two of Flannel thro' it; otherwise, it will grow rusty.*"

A. A Trocar of the moll convenient size for emptying the Abdomen, when the Water is not gelatinous. It is here represented with the Perforator in the Canula, just as it is placed when we perform the Operation.

I suddenly picture a large composition eighteenth-century tableau, in the style of Joshua Reynolds, Johnson's friend. Against the dark background of a gloomy room, Johnson sitting on a chair in his unkempt bedroom, dressed in a dirty white night shirt, has seized the knob of the trocar from his doctor, stabs the canula in his swollen offending flesh. All attending—the doctor with his scrap of flannel, the friends, Francis Barber (born Quashey, called Frank) his African-Jamaican manservant to whom Johnson will leave most of his money—stand with their backs to us, hands raised in the iconic eighteenth-century gesture of horror.

The parallelogram of light has shifted while I wasn't looking. Now half on the wall, half out the window, a broken shaft of light, disjunctive as appears a pencil half submerged in a glass of water.

I know, at last, my mother is, at last, dying.

And I must run to class, right now.

II.

A MONTH LATER, late December, classes over, grades turned in, my daughter and I flew to Denver for Christmas, as always.

From the airport, we drove directly to see my mother at the rehabilitation center, which struck me sharply as more of a way station between hospice and hospital. This being one of her "good days," my mother was receiving visitors.

A lively young nurse, my mother's handmaiden and her guard-dog on "bad days," bustled in and out, shifted my mother, adjusted the machine monitoring her heartbeat. My mother was sat up in bed, next to her a large purse filled with the essential cosmetics, her jewelry, and "the pills." On her bed table a radio and stacked next to it several movies to watch on the screen angled above. My mother looked just like herself. Nice haircut. Her face "on." Fawn-colored silky pyjamas. I found myself tempted, for a second, to think that

once more her death would be reshelved with all our indeterminately impending deaths. But her belly swelled now like a beach ball under the pyjama top, straining the last button. Dropsy. Edema. I had read about her death. I sat there in the presence of someone I knew was really dying. Discomfited. Because my mother did not think she was dying.

When she had gathered enough breath to speak, my mother apologized for not having the house ready for the holiday; we would all just have to do it ourselves this year. She *had* hoped to be home for Christmas Day, didn't look like it now, but surely a day or two later. She would most certainly love to get away from the church groups who trooped through the rehab center to sing carols, stopping at each room to bring "comfort and joy" to the inmates. She paused and almost laughed, "I used to do that myself. If only I knew. I'll never do that again." Were we staying until New Year's Day?

Her "good day" turned into a "not-so-good day," and we left for the waiting room. Two hours later, my mother collapsed. I settled my daughter in the waiting room with my sister-in-law and rushed back to my mother's room. Out in the hall the nurse said that my mother had only hours to live, she knew the signs. No point in going to the hospital. However, my mother insisted on an ambulance and my father, who had just arrived, would not step in to persuade my mother not to go. He knew she knew her own mind. The ambulance took its time, as if dawdling would solve everything, but arrived at last and sped off to the hospital with my mother.

Five hours later, I sat with the rest of my family in a hospital waiting room, right outside the intensive care unit. We all knew she was dying; we didn't have to talk about it. When a nurse stepped through the glass doors to announce that we could go in one at a time, I stood up first and, out of habit, on my way picked up a magazine from the pile by my chair.

My mother wasn't in a ward yet, but some large procedure room. Unconscious, she lay sprawled on a high hospital gurney, her hair stiff with dried sweat, make-up worn off, so rare to ever catch her like this. Yet the expression on her face

I recognized as her *other* face, when she was not smiling her lovely large smile, when abstracted in thought, when you came upon her alone and musing, she had an impassive face like that of a statue of blind Lady Justice.

She had been tapped, with what I could now only too vividly imagine as a surgical steel version of the trocar and canula.

The offending part of her, that white belly slack now with a band-aid over the puncture, was exposed. I pulled up the pyjama pants and closed the pajama top, trying not to disturb the bandage.

Beyond her bed, on a counter, sat a large jar, a jar like a huge pickle jar, all I could compare it to at that moment because it was filled with the tapped water—yellowish, clear enough, only a few wispy clouds—water that looked just like pickle juice. Back-lit by the counter's fluorescent light, the liquid glowed, as if the jar belonged in some carnival show and a pickled monstrosity had just been lifted out and held up to the horrified, avid crowd.

I sat down, dropped the magazine in my lap, and picked up my mother's limp cold hand. If she woke up now she, too, must certainly, at last, know she was dying. I began to worry that, being herself, she would be distressed that I would be distressed about her dying. She might even apologize.

While I held her hand, I could not help reading the cover of the magazine with all its December–January promises of enhanced wealth, health, and beauty in the New Year just a few page turns away. A young doctor swung into the cubicle. Seeing my mother was not awake, he waved a hand at the pickle jar and abruptly informed me that this tap had to be the last tap—trying to make clear, it seemed, that she had tapped out of all her taps. There was no point in tapping her anymore, she was dying.

Absurd—I felt unjustly scolded by him. *I knew* she was dying, he didn't have to tell *me*! I wasn't demanding *another tap*!

At that moment, triggered by the sound of a doctor's voice, my mother lifted her head. She fixed on the doctor her blue

eyes narrowed and fierce, rasped out in her sharpest tone of command (used rarely, but as children we knew that implacable tone meant business), "What about my potassium level? Did you check it? What about my potassium?"

My mother was later moved into a ward of several patients divided from one another by curtains. She was conscious and herself. In rotating groups of three or four, the family made small talk about the holiday while she hardly said a word and kept her eyes riveted on the machine reading off the numbers of her blood pressure, as if willing it to keep steady at the right number, which she knew precisely. I felt we were distracting her from an absolutely crucial vigilance. And besides, she must have known we thought she was dying, so irritating.

Visiting hours over, we all left for my parents' house. At two in the morning the phone rang. I stumbled down the dark hall and picked up first, she had died. No one, not even the night nurse, remarked the moment of her passing.

III.

AFTER MY MOTHER died, I finished, at last, in leisure, the account of Johnson's death. Boswell's report of the last days is secondhand and infused with a pious tone; the absence of Boswell's presence means the absence of the lively and telling detail. When Johnson finally asks his doctor whether he will recover—"'*Give me,' said he, 'a direct answer,*'" and is given the direct answer—that only a miracle can save him—Johnson replies, "'*Then I will take no more physic, not even opiates for I have prayed that I may render up my soul to God unclouded.*'"

Johnson's last prose composition is a prayer, included in the *Life*. Not memorable. More marmorial. The act of reconciling himself to death and of framing his hopes for the life to come struck no sparks off Johnson's inner flint.

I have to admit, this ending disappointed me. My disappointment that of a reader reading a novel whose main character takes an unexpected turn at the end. This Johnson on his

deathbed seemed not *in character.* I tried to work with the prayer—rereading its first sentence I was tempted to think Johnson's reconciliation not quite complete. Did I detect (and, forgive me, as once more I laughed out loud) a last moment of Johnsonian wit as he receives the last sacrament: "'*Almighty and most merciful Father, I am now as to human eyes,* ***it seems****, about to commemorate, for the last time, the death of thy son Jesus Christ, our Saviour and Redeemer.*'" My emphasis. As if: "it seems" so to others, but maybe not yet.

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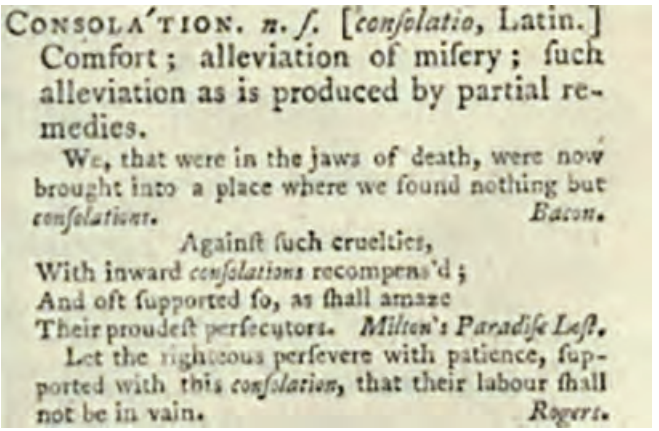

CONSOLA'TION. *n. f.* [*consolatio*, Latin.] Comfort; alleviation of misery; such alleviation as is produced by partial remedies.

We, that were in the jaws of death, were now brought into a place where we found nothing but *consolations.* *Bacon.*

Againſt ſuch cruelties,
With inward *conſolations* recompens'd;
And oft ſupported ſo, as ſhall amaze
Their proudeſt perſecutors. *Milton's Paradiſe Loſt.*

Let the righteous perſevere with patience, ſupported with this *conſolation*, that their labour ſhall not be in vain. *Rogers.*

SEVERAL MONTHS after my mother's death, I started to write this essay as a form of not mourning, but consolation—with an emphasis on the "partial remedy" in Johnson's definition: "Consolation. *n.s.* [*consolatio,* Latin.] Comfort, alleviation of misery, such alleviation as is produced by partial remedies" (*Dictionary of the English Language*). I wanted to write about how weird it was that I only realized she was truly dying by reading about Johnson's "collection of water"—maybe not so weird, though, once more in my life I had to read in a book what I should have simply *known*. But

I could not finish the piece for the longest time. Perhaps Johnson's final stoic acceptance of his death made my mother's denial of her own imminent death, her asperity in the service of that denial, irrational and petty.

So the essay sat in a bundle of rubber-banded drafts, moved from desktop, to box, that box to the floor beneath—variously—my bed, my desk, the bookshelves in my office.

Finally in a fit to finish all the incomplete work of the last decade (which, collectively, I entitled to myself "While I Wasn't Writing"), I took up "Consolations" again.

Committed to ending the essay, yet unable to locate my ending, I took a detour, a bit of research, and discovered a first-hand account of Johnson's last days in Sir John Hawkins' *The Life of Samuel Johnson* published the same year Johnson died, 1784. Boswell's first edition of his *Life* appeared seven years later; its lively representation of the living, talking Johnson overshadowed Hawkins' biography. Like Boswell, Hawkins records Johnson's preparation for death, his prayers, his reading of devotional works—AND simultaneously Johnson's continued relentless resistance to his "*dropsy*." Johnson tracks minutely its "*progress*" in a journal. He begs his doctors to give him another "*puncture*" to relieve the swellings; when they evade his request he roars, "*How many men in a year die through the timidity of those whom they consult for health! I want length of life, and you fear giving me pain, which I care not for.*" When they give in and "*scarifie*" him, they can't satisfy him, he urges them on, "*Deeper, deeper;—I will abide the consequence: you are afraid of your reputation, but that is nothing to me. You all pretend to love me, but you do not love me so well as I myself do.*"

Frank confesses to Hawkins that on the day before he died, Johnson secrets a lancet into his bed, then "*drawing his hand under the bed-clothes stabbs at his swollen legs*." Later that day "*he got at a pair of scissors that lay in a drawer by him, and plunged them deep in the calf of each leg.*" His surgeon, Mr. Cruikshank (Hogarthian name!), dresses these new wounds; then the loss of blood—"*it was conjectured*"—

brought on a "*dozing*" and "*after a long silence, he passed away unnoticed*."

There is a suspicion that Johnson has taken his own life. Hawkins hastens to make clear he has been "*thus minute in recording the particulars of his last moments*" to ensure we know these actions were "*not done to hasten his end, but to discharge the water that he conceived to be in him*." Johnson looked "*upon himself as a bloated carca*se."

The subsequent autopsy found:

Two of the valves of the aorta were ossified.
The air-cells of the lungs unusally distended.
One of the kidneys destroyed by the pressure of the water.
The liver schirrous.
A stone in the gall-bladder, of the size of a common gooseberry.

(Now I have all the time in the world—I look up the size of a common gooseberry—gooseberry such an unbelievably England word. It can be as large as a small plum, but is usually an inch.)

Hawkins' account of Johnson's death feels in character; his final pronouncement on these wrenching last hours gets it mostly right: "*Many persons have appeared possessed of more serenity of mind in this awful scene; some have remained unmoved at the dissolution of the vital union; and, it may be deemed a discouragement from the severe practice of religion, that Dr. Johnson, whose whole life was a preparation for his death, and a conflict with natural infirmity, was disturbed with terror at the prospect of the grave. Let not this relax the circumspection of any one. It is true, that natural firmness of spirit, or the confidence of hope, may buoy up the mind to the last; but, however heroic an undaunted death may appear, it is not what we should pray for. As Johnson lived the life of the righteous, his end was that of a Christian: he strictly fulfilled the injunction of the apostle, to work out his salvation with fear and trembling.*"

Hawkins' neat argument is that because he was a real Christian, his duty *was* to approach death with "fear and

trembling." Certainly this lines up with Johnson's quip in the epigraph I had chosen early on and didn't then completely understand—Dr. Dodd should not be willing to die; having "*a clearer view of infinite purity*" he must know even a "*better*" man may not measure up at the final judgment. He should be "*willing*" to sacrifice "*his hands*" and "*both legs*." (Both legs! Bring on Mr. Cruikshank!)

But. Also. And. I think he simply wanted to keep on living if he could.

My mother, too, had prepared for death. Two decades earlier she had purchased the gravesite three rows from that of her parents and grandparents. That fall she had selected the texts and hymns for her funeral service at the church she faithfully attended. My father did have to persuade her in late November to go with him to meet the funeral directors and finalize her "wishes." He did say she was pretty tightlipped on that occasion.

My mother did believe in hell, though I'm pretty sure she didn't feel in much danger of ending up there. (But my young nephews, if my sister didn't baptize them, that was another story!) I think she simply didn't want to die or die without a fight. Johnson's ringing challenge to death upon his deathbed was hers, too: "*I will be conquered, I will not capitulate.*"

I suddenly laughed and cried. Samuel Johnson and my mother, so unlike in temperament and talents, were yet very much alike. Both so long tortured and let down by the body, yet for that very reason, both seasoned warriors of the drawn-out battle. Although dying for decades, they insisted on persisting, preferring to remain alive as long as possible in the world they so passionately embraced.

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WHEN I was nine, after attending an open casket wake, I became terrified of death, especially of being buried alive. I could not sleep at night; in church during the sermons (often weirdly and drearily based on some line or predicament from

the Charlie Brown comic strip), I pored over "The Order for the Burial of the Dead" in the prayer book to torture myself. Then the terror ceased. Now, when a car comes to a screeching halt inches away as I cross the street, at that moment I think, fuck it, I am going to die right now. Then I don't die. I walk on. Untried by chronic illness and pain, I don't know how much I would fight death. I do believe I am no Johnson, I am not my mother.

Sometimes when on a hot summer night I walk by the open meadow near my house, cooler air from it suddenly pours over me and, I think, maybe death will be like that. Pretty to imagine so.

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FLYING OVER Nebraska in a bright blue sky, immense fields far below, the great circles of the irrigation arms sweeping round and round, little creeks and hills, farm houses hidden in groves. It is summer, seven months after my mother's death. We will stay at no longer my parents' house, but from now on at my father's house. We will visit my mother's grave, which we last saw as a flower-heaped hillock in the frozen tundra of vast cemetery last December.

9:00 a.m. I set my watch back to Denver time. We've been up since 4. For once I am too tired to read. I close my eyes, but too much caffeine to fall asleep. And my daughter, Lu, who never sleeps on planes, is talking me to death. Even the endless cartoons, movies, nature shows flickering on the screen in front of her don't distract her. I grunt and mumble, as if I might be asleep and dreaming like almost everyone else on the plane. I win a moment of silence. Please, God, let it last!

Then Lu pipes up again. "Where will Grandpa go when he's dead?"

I am not at all surprised by this question. At nine she is both immature for her age and strangely too mature. After my mother's death, Lu was sad but showed no fear of death. At the wake, she greeted people at the door with, "Do you want

to see her?" Guided them to the open coffin, "Doesn't she look great?" Which, of course, my mother did, she seemed a lot like when she was alive, she had her hair fixed, her face "on," her nails done. Her expression still retained that final asperity, the mouth tight—not happy at all she was dead.

The day of the funeral, Lu rode in the black car right behind the hearse, overjoyed by the sirens and the police escort racing through red lights. At the cemetery, she acquired the autograph of the hearse driver, Frank Lopez. He signed the funeral program from the church service and answered her question about the backhoe lurking behind some tombstones a few rows over.

So I tell her what my father has told us. "Grandpa wants to be cremated and buried with Grandma."

Silence. Could that be enough to satisfy her?

"What will happen to you when you die?"

My eyes wide open now. A delicate turn of conversation. Is she anxious about abandonment—she is adopted, by a single parent—or am I mistaking murky depths of feeling when the surface fact is the important information.

"Well, I always thought I would be cremated, but am getting partial to being planted." Years ago I fantasized about walking into the mountains, swimming away in the sea. No fuss of a funeral. Later, when I realized I might not be able to get myself to the mountains or the shore, went for fire, ashes scattered. But after my mother's death, I saw it might be important to be somewhere, where someone could visit.

"I *know* what I'm going to do with you."

Lu has my full attention there high above Nebraska. "You do?"

"I'm going to have you stuffed. And I'll take off a few pounds."

I laughed so loud and for so long. Woke up the plane. Decided not to reflect on whether Lu's wish to turn my dead body over to a taxidermist was a gesture of affection, a need to not let go, or a warning about the darts being sharpened.

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